Women under the Shariah?

It is widely believed in the West that Islam subjugates women. Many believe that men force women to cover their hair, to stay at home chained to the stove, that women should remain uneducated and weak as second class citizens within an Islamic society. Therefore, they call for the liberation of Muslim women through the abandonment of Islamic tradition, to take on Western values. So how does Islam view women?

Islam considers women equal to men in the most important regard: that both men and women are addressed by Allah (God) in His revelation, the Quran, with similar rights, duties and prohibitions. Men and women will be accounted for what Allah asked of them and will not be accountable for what was not asked of them. One is not considered better or more worthy than the other.

However, men and women were addressed differently by Allah in some matters, so, in His Wisdom, He has made men and women the same in some things and different in others. For example, both men and women pray five times each day, fast the month of Ramadan and have the right to own property. Also both men and women are not allowed to steal, murder or have sexual relationships outside of marriage. The penalties for men and women are the same under the Shariah. However, women are not obliged to pray at the Mosque on Fridays, to provide monetarily for their families or to join the army during times of war, as men are.

Women can work and are encouraged to gain a good education. In Western societies, women are strongly encouraged, almost obliged, to seek paid employment. If a woman chooses to stay at home and look after her children, she is derided, so many women feel pressurised to work. This has a severe impact on family life and her children's upbringing. Britain today has real growing problems with the youth; teenage pregnancies, broken homes, vandalism, theft and even murder. Politicians are struggling to find answers. The increasingly negative Western youth culture problem, whilst not entirely stemming from the home, is certainly not helped by having busy, exhausted and even absent mothers, even though she is more affluent than before.

In Islam, the highest and most respected position within society is that of a mother. The Prophet said *"Paradise is at your mothers feet"*. Women are regarded as being crucial to the vitality and well-being of the entire society. Children are the future of all nations and they deserve the best possible start in life. Who is better placed to raise well balanced, well mannered children than their mothers? Therefore Muslim women do not feel pressurised to work and, hence, have a real choice to stay at home to give their children a stable and attentive upbringing. However, if she so chooses, she is permitted to find suitable work.

The Shariah itself is based upon the example of the Prophet Muhammad, which owes a lot to the testimonies of his wives, daughters and other women. Their individual narration is considered to be just as valuable by scholars as the testimony of a man. A single woman is equivalent to a man in sighting the moon for the advent of Ramadan, one of the pillars of Islam.

So the law itself is based on the testimony of women, the scholars who derive this law can be women and the judges who apply the law can be women. It is clearly not the case that women are considered to be second to men in the eyes of the law or less reliable witnesses. There are some cases where the legal testimony of a woman is valued as that of a man such as cases of adultery as follows:

"And as for those who accuse their own wives (of adultery), but have no witnesses except themselves, let each of these call God Four times to witness that he is indeed telling the truth. But (as for the wife, all) chastisement shall be averted from her by her calling God four times to witness that he is indeed telling a lie." (Quran Chapter 24, verses 6-8)

The stipulation of requiring two women to replace one man as witness is mentioned in the Quran in the context of the writing of a contract for a loan. Hence, the testimony of two women is equal to the

testimony of one man in actions which take place amongst the male community and in the public life. The testimony of women is accepted on its own, in matters which take place amongst the female community, where there are no men present, such as a crime which is committed in the ladies' room. This is understood by the fact that men and women take different roles in an Islamic society, with there being some spheres in public life that most women will not be familiar with, due to their normal non-involvement in such matters.

Some scholars have extended this to serious violent crime, such as murder, on the premise that women were normally protected from such crimes and, hence, may require support in their testimony although this is not stipulated in the Quran or example of the Prophet). It is unfortunate that in the 21st century under liberal secularism, no-one is safe from violent crimes including the elderly, women and children and so all are frequently required as witnesses for such crimes.

These judgements on witnesses are made on a case by case basis according to the facts of the crime or dispute in question. The Shariah does have mechanisms to differentiate between men and women and in what situation their witness is more useful but this in no way implies that the testimony of a woman is less reliable than that of a man in Islam or that they are inferior in the eyes of the law.

Allah tells women to cover themselves so that they be recognised as pious Muslim women and so are not bothered by men. It is a dress code intended to ensure respect and decency in the interactions between men and women in society. The head-to-toe covering of Muslim women, with the exception of their hands and face, is described in the Quran as the places where their jewellery is worn. Hence, male strangers' attention is not grabbed, so are not attracted to her, as she puts on no dazzling display. Men are also required to dress modestly.

This dress code is not, as some have suggested, to subjugate women, nor to prevent men from lechery or worse. It is completely incorrect in Islam to say that a woman who does not cover is "asking for trouble." Whether a woman is covered Islamically or not, a Muslim man is obliged to lower his gaze, treat her with respect and decency. Her dress code is not seen as a criterion or justification for illicit actions, or treating her with anything other than the utmost respect.

Western societies have a different dress code. In general, both men and women, but especially women, are under enormous pressure to conform to the fashions of the day, which revolve around promoting female images most likely to be attractive to men. Often this includes a relative increase in the amount of skin displayed and a relative reduction in the amount of cloth as covering. Observing Western Society, it is apparent that it does not promote men to treat women with respect and decency or vice versa. Men are commonly encouraged to be lecherous and often speak of women in the most derogatory terms. Women are virtually traded as commodities and objects of lust or desire by corporations in their advertising campaigns. Women feel under pressure to adhere to unrealistic images of perfection; undoubtedly responsible for the increasing low self-esteem, eating disorders and depression among women. The Western dress code achieves an admiration of a sort, although often unwanted, but affords no real respect. Allah, in His Greatness, has given Muslims a different dress code, as part of a comprehensive social system and it is not surprising that many Muslim women choose it over other dress codes.

Women and men are not the same. Allah, with His Knowledge and Wisdom, has made for men and women different roles, rights, responsibilities and duties. Allah addressed all men and women equally as human beings in the Quran. However, when these rights and duties relate to the nature of a female, in her description as a female, and they relate to the nature of her position in the community and her place in society, or when they relate to the nature of the man in his description as a male, and they relate to the nature of his position in the community and his place in society; then these rights and duties will inevitably be different between the man and woman. For example, men have been given the responsibility of protecting women, providing for them and upholding their dignity. This does not make women less than men in any way, but enhances the balance and harmony that exists within an enlightened Islamic society.